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ABSTRACT

The letter is intended to help parents of young blind children understand the effects of their expectations on their child's development. The importance of believing in the essential normality and ability of the blind child is underlined, and parents are told basic information about developmental patterns, educational programs (including instruction in special tools such as braille, and segregated or integrated programs), and adaptations for personal independence. The parent's role in overcoming social prejudice toward the blind is addressed, and parents are advised to seek to change public misconceptions about blindness as well as to encourage the child's expectations of independence. (CL)

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AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PARENTS OF BLIND CHILDREN

FROM THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND

Dear Parents:

The shock of having a child who is blind is probably still with you. Like most other parents of blind children you have been wondering about your child's future—wondering whether he will develop normally like other children; wondering if he can go to school and get an education; wondering if he can take care of himself as an adult, or if you will have to look out for him the rest of your lives.

To many of you the fact that your child is potentially capable of growing up to live a normal, productive, happy life seems unbelievable, yet it is true. The experience of thousands of capable blind people, representing different levels of intelligence and different degrees of ability, has demonstrated beyond a doubt that blindness alone need not limit anyone to a life of dependency and helplessness. Whether your child grows up to be confident, able, and self-sufficient or helpless and afraid will depend a great deal, not on his blindness, but on you.

To the extent that you believe in the essential normality and ability of the blind, you will be able to accept your child as normal and able, and to give him the encouragement, the confidence, and the freedom he needs to develop his own methods of doing without sight what most other people do with the aid of their eyes.

It is not easy to believe in the blind when most people around you still think of blind people as nearly helpless, deprived of the things that make life worth living, doomed to spend their days in a gloomy "world of darkness." It is hard to come upon the blind beggar on the corner, with his tin cup and pathetic whine, and still tell yourself that for every blind beggar out among the public a hundred blind workers are earning their own living like everyone else at a multitude of different jobs. It is difficult indeed to read and hear the many pleas for donations to charities that bring light and sunshine to the poor, poor blind, without wondering just how and why such charities exist if the blind are not in fact miserable creatures who need all the help and cheer they can get.

But blind machinists are operating lathes in factories without sighted assistance. Blind lawyers are arguing and winning cases without tin cups and accordions. Blind scientists are contributing to national defense and private industry without the support of charity. And blind housewives are cooking meals, raising babies, and pacifying husbands with smiles on their faces.

And there are blind professors in universities, and blind teachers in public schools, and blind social workers, blind electricians, blind musi-

cians, blind radio technicians, blind salesmen, blind secretaries, blind receptionists, blind shopkeepers, blind tailors, blind psychologists, blind public officials, blind judges—and blind criminals. They are already proving that 150 million Americans can be wrong—about the blind.

Will your child develop normally like other children? Yes, he will if you consider him normal and raise him in a normal way. This does not mean that you will pretend he is not blind. Pretending cannot alter the facts. It means that you will give him the same opportunities for exploration, for solving his own problems, for learning to accept responsibilities that you would give to any child of yours, even though your methods of teaching and his methods of learning and doing may be different. It means that you will not pity him because he cannot see, and so teach him to feel sorry for himself. It means that you will not do things for him before you give him the chance to do them for himself, and so let him come to depend on the help of others. It means that you will not shudder when he bumps a chair or shriek when he trips over a loose rug, and so instill in him fear of moving freely and dealing with his environment first-hand. It means that you will not try to pay him with extra services and privileges for the sight you had nothing to do with taking away, and so convince him that by virtue of his blindness he deserves the fruits of life that others have to earn by hard work. It means that you will not keep your child hidden from the rest of the world or blush with shame when his blindness is noticed, and so, as far as he is concerned, cast your vote with those who would make blindness a guarantee of inferiority. It means that you will not, from the time he is young, stress the limitations you believe his blindness is going to impose upon him, and so narrow his level of aspiration and deny him the courage and the drive to later prove you wrong. Most of all it means that you will not merely tolerate him because of the obligations his blindness places on you, but love him for the person he is and respect him as an individual human being, with the same needs and the same potential for growth and achievement as his sighted peers. Blind children do grow and develop normally if they are given the chance. Your child can if you will let him.

Will your child be able to go to school and get an education? Certainly. Educational programs for blind children have long been in existence all over the nation. More are being started every year to meet current needs. Blind children, through methods and devices utilizing senses other than sight, are fully capable of acquiring the skills and the knowledge comprised by the normal school curriculum. Thousands of blind persons today are graduates of colleges and universities, and a great number hold higher degrees.

Many special tools of learning are available to blind children to assist them in their pursuit of an education. Braille, a system of raised dots punched in paper and read with the fingers, serves as an efficient reading and writing medium. Extensions of the Braille system include mathematical signs, chemical notation, music notation, and even shorthand. In addition to the hundreds of Braille textbooks available to schools where blind chil-

dren are educated, blind children—like blind adults—have access to a free Braille library, under the Library of Congress, which mails books on request to blind persons anywhere in the country. Also used in educational programs, and available to blind individuals from the Library of Congress, are "talking books," transcribed on long-playing records and, like Braille books, mailed free on request. A record player designed to play talking book records is loaned for life to any blind person who requests it, including your child when he reaches school age.

In addition to talking books, Braille books, and the various devices used to write Braille, there are such specialized educational aids as relief maps, raised line drawing kits, Brailled clock faces, models, and educational tape recordings. Most learning for blind children, however, as for sighted children, will not depend on "gadgets" but will come from a combination of good teaching and the desire to learn. Blind children, through reading, through their teachers, and through many real-life experiences involving personal contact, can come to know and understand their world through their senses other than sight.

Most blind children today are being educated either in residential schools for the blind, or in "integrated" programs, where special teachers are available to blind students in a public school setting. The residential school offers a wide variety of specialized facilities designed to meet the needs of blind pupils, and an environment where the problems of blindness are met in common, with the confidence and drive inspired by mutual encouragement and mutual competition. The integrated program offers the opportunity for closer home and community life, and the chance to meet from the beginning, with the aid of a specialist in the education of blind children, the challenge of achieving on an equal basis with sighted peers.

Blind children are learning and developing successfully under both types of programs. It is your responsibility as parents to evaluate all educational programs available to your blind child, and to select the one you believe will best prepare him to take his place, with competence and confidence, as an independent, self-supporting adult citizen, able to compete on equal terms with his sighted fellow citizens. Should the program available fall short of this objective, it is your further responsibility—for few but you will care enough—to initiate or support the modification of existing facilities or the establishment of new ones to do the job.

Blind children go to school. Programs and materials do exist to make their education equal to that of sighted children. How far your child goes in school will depend on his capacity for learning, not his blindness.

Can your child really become independent and self-supporting as an adult? Won't you, or some agency, need to watch over him and to help him through the difficult task of living as a blind person in a world organized around the use of sight? Isn't competition on an equal basis an impossible goal, since the sighted have everything the blind have, plus sight which the blind do not have?

The most convincing answer—and the only one necessary—is being given daily

by the thousands of independent, self-supporting blind persons who have reached the "impossible" goal. In all types of employment ranging from unskilled labor to university professorship the blind have already proven their ability to hold successfully the same jobs held by the sighted, and to live a normal life before and after work.

Blindness is not a disabling handicap in itself. Most things done with the aid of sight can also be done without sight. Blindness is a physical nuisance, an inconvenience which makes it necessary to learn other ways of doing what most people do with the aid of sight. The important fact is that these ways do exist, and that they work—for any blind person with enough self-confidence to use them.

In most instances the adaptations are neither different nor difficult, but rather common-sense extensions of what you yourself use, or could use, every day: closer attention to sounds and smells and more exact interpretation of them; greater use of touch and direct contact; better organization; closer attention to spoken words; and more reliance on memory. Certain appliances and devices are available to add to the convenience or the safety with which a blind person performs the tasks of daily living—a cane for travelling; a Brailled watch; measuring tools with raised dots or lines—but in general, necessity and experience lead to on-the-spot resolutions of physical problems as they arise, and to the average, competent, well-adjusted blind person life without sight holds no terrors and presents no insurmountable obstacles to independence.

But, though blindness is only a physical nuisance, it is a social handicap. People in general, though with an increasing number of exceptions, have not yet learned that the limitations of blindness can be few. They still regard the blind as a miserable, incapacitated group, deprived of all that makes life worthwhile and kept alive only through the charity of their more able sighted brethren. So widespread and deep-rooted is the belief in the general inferiority of the blind, that many blind people themselves have yielded to it, grown accustomed to dependency, and become, in fact, as helpless and spiritless as the sighted believed them to be all along. Such persons, quite naturally, serve to strengthen and perpetuate the misconceptions about blindness of which they are the victims. Capable blind persons have proved that blindness need not mean helplessness; blind persons who have surrendered to public attitudes have likewise proved that blindness can mean helplessness.

You, as parents, must assume a two-fold responsibility to insure that mistaken public attitudes do not lead your child into a life of discouragement, dependency, or helplessness. You must, first of all, believe yourself in his ability to some day hold a job, raise a family, and lead a normal life, and surround him with an environment in which this belief and expectation are dominant, so that his own conviction may grow strong enough to withstand the beliefs and expectations to the contrary which he cannot help but encounter when he leaves the family circle. Such belief on your part is best acquired from a wide knowledge of blind people and what they are achieving today, and from personal contact with successful, self-

sufficient blind adults who exemplify the type of citizen you would like to see your son or daughter one day become.

Secondly, you must actively seek to change public misconceptions about blindness and its limitations, by every reasonable means in your power, so that your child, when he attains adulthood, will not be met with the countless instances of discrimination and plain disbelief encountered by the blind today when seeking employment or admittance to activities considered quite normal for the sighted. It is not an easy task to change long-standing opinions and attitudes, especially when public sympathies are involved, yet it must be done if your child is to have a real chance to achieve according to his own ability, rather than someone else's wrong estimation of his disability.

Much has been accomplished in this direction in recent years, largely by the independent blind themselves, both as individuals and through united effort in organizations formed by the blind for their common advancement. Today the position of the blind in our society is better than it has ever been before. Many jobs from which the blind were excluded, including various areas of public service, are now open to them because of anti-discriminatory legislation or the demonstrated capability of a blind "pioneer" who entered and succeeded in a particular field in spite of the "obvious impossibility" of meeting the requirements and performing the duties without sight. Many people now recognize the right and the ability of the blind to compete with the sighted for a livelihood and social status. The position of the blind is better than it has ever been, but it is far from one of general acceptance on the basis of equality. Before the latter position can be reached a great and determined campaign must be waged by the blind, and by those who know their true abilities, in order to bring public recognition and acceptance of the facts rather than the fiction about blindness and in order to direct public efforts on behalf of the blind toward the goals of self-sufficiency and integration with their fellow-citizens, instead of vegetation in the sunshine of charity, no matter how benignly bestowed. The efforts you extend today, as parents of a blind child, in working with blind adults for greater public understanding and acceptance of the blind as equal human beings will bring increased opportunity for employment, for full and satisfying family life, for happiness when your son or daughter grows up to be the blind adult of tomorrow.

Blindness is not a condition to be disregarded or minimized. It is a physical nuisance which imposes a few absolute limitations—such as the impossibility of driving a car—and requires numerous, though not greatly difficult, adaptations for normal life in a sighted world. It is also a social handicap which, because of misconceptions on the part of the sighted, has until recently kept most blind people from employment and achievement on equal terms with their sighted peers. But blindness is not a disabling physical or social handicap in itself. Thousands of successful, self-sufficient, happy blind people have already proven this to be true. The National Federation of the Blind wants you, as parents, to know the hope and the challenge that are equally yours as your blind son or daughter

grows to adulthood. If you can hold firmly to the hope, and instill it into your child, while meeting the challenge with strength and energy, then your child, as an adult, will be ready to strive, with every expectation of success, for those things which any parent wants for any child: a job, a home, a chance to contribute to his society.